



# ONE LAST NIGHT TRAP

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by Lt. Doug Cochran

The good stories always seem to start the same way: a dark night, no moon, and no horizon. It was month five of my third and most exciting cruise, as a Super JO in an FA-18 squadron. After five months of flying combat missions in two separate theaters, it was time to go home. We had left the Gulf six days earlier and hadn't flown since. CAG had decided to give us one more fly-day before going through the Ditch and entering our last port. Of course, the air plan maximized night sorties; we had to keep everyone night-current for the translat.

I was scheduled for current-operations watch officer, basically an air-wing SDO, during the middle of the day. That meant a night trap was my only opportunity to fly on one of our last fly-days. I was on the hunt to break a hundred traps for cruise, and I wasn't about to pass up the chance to fly, even if it might be one more night trap.

My wingman and I were scheduled for a Red Air mission against some Toms. Man-up and pre-flight checks went normally. Sitting behind cat 1, I did something I never do. I had some extra time, so I decided to put the time in the UFC. To do so, the INS has to be in NAV. I always take off in CV, but that night I changed my pattern. Mistake? I doubt it, but like all good fighter pilots, I am superstitious about my habit patterns.

As I rotated the switch to NAV, that little voice in the back of my head said, "Boy, this would be a bad night for the INS to dump." It didn't, and moments later, I was in tension on the cat.

Everything checked good, lights on, the cat fired; "What's that master caution for? Fly the jet, where's my saving grace?" The velocity vector was gone. "This is not happening on my last night flight of cruise."

Sure enough, the INS had dumped on the stroke. No big deal. I had a 1+30 cycle to get an in-flight align-

ment. Standby gyro was being displayed on the HUD, and all was well.

“What was that?” I said. The standby-gyro display on the HUD just started tumbling. That made things interesting. After some follow-on checks, sure enough, both the standby displays on the HUD and the DDI were tumbling at random intervals. One minute they were stable, the next they were spinning.

The actual standby gyro, conveniently placed directly behind my right knee, was stable. It kept getting better. I had to do a little night tanking before I could start my IFA.

After an uneventful dance behind the S-3, it was time to pull out the book, go through the checklist, and get my IFA started. My wingman and I told the mission commander that we wouldn't be playing tonight, and we headed off for our hour of straight and level. As my luck would have it, the INS was degraded and would not accept an IFA. My wingman and I tried all the tricks in the book, with no luck either getting the INS to take an IFA or getting the HUD/DDI to stop spinning. Now all that was running through my head was how I was going to get this thing aboard on a dark night on the standby gyro alone.

As I assessed my situation, I determined that my altitude, airspeed and waterline symbol on the HUD were accurate. It was only the pitch ladders that seemed to be spinning. This was a plus because, now, if I could only get to a position behind the ship where I could receive ILS, I might be able to get this thing aboard. After some discussion with my squadron rep, we decided that I'd fly a section approach as Dash 2 and allow my wingman to get me to a safe start.

All was going as planned as we reached three miles behind the ship and approached our push over point. As my lead began his descent, I ask for a double-check on what ILS was showing him. My ILS indicated well

below glideslope. Lead confirmed his showed on-and-on. At a mile, I had the carrier box in sight, took over the approach visually, and told my lead, “I got it.” The next thing I heard was,

**“Four Oh Four, you are low and lined up right. Ten degrees left and climb.” That's not a good start.**

“Four Oh Four, three-quarters of a mile, call the ball.” As I looked out for the ball, I clearly saw the datums but no ball.

“Clara.”

“You're low,” came the response from the LSO. Not a good start to an already challenging approach. After a couple of power calls from paddles, I saw the ball all right. It was racing toward the top of the lens. One last correction and it was time to suck this one up and take my bolter like a man.

**F**lying again. Fortunately, my lead was right where he was supposed to be and we joined up quickly. Not the way I wanted that one to end, but at least I knew I could get over the ramp safely. I just had to get to a better start. After some discussion with my lead, we concluded that my ILS was giving me erroneous indications. Remember how it all started? Dark, no moon, no horizon. OK, what did I have left in my bag of tricks?

After more discussion on downwind, we decide to have the ship lock me up so I could get ACLS and have some kind of reference on glide slope and line-up. We talked about the pitfalls and decided to have lead turn his data link off and verified the side number they would be sending the information to. I had now con-

vinced myself that with a good crosscheck from lead and his ILS, I would be able to verify I was getting valid ACLS information. Mistake No. 1.

Ten-mile hook. Plenty of time to check everything out.

"Four Oh Four," approach called, "lock-on six miles. Say needles."

"On and up," I replied.

"Concur. Fly mode two."

Still flying wing, it was time to crosscheck with lead's ILS. He agreed. As we approached our pushover point the second time, everything looked good. My ACLS was matching his ILS, and I was slowly learning to ignore the spinning pitch ladder. Two and a half miles and I had this one in the bag. We compared his ILS and my ACLS once again and they still concurred. At that point, I told lead that I wanted the lead and he could fly wing just to make sure I didn't fly into the water. Mistake No.2.

At 2 miles, everything was still on and on, and I could see a couple of lights that appeared to be the carrier. Unbeknownst to me at that time, my wingman and I were starting to separate. He was preparing to take it around, as it appeared to him that I was all set up. The next thing I heard was, "A mile and a half, drifting slightly left of course on glide path." Slight correction to the right and a quick peek to look for the carrier box. Nothing but a single light; that was strange.

Fortunately, paddles was ready for me and wasn't about to let me go around again. Remember, this was our last night flying, and we were entering the Ditch at first light. This was no time to have a Hornet stuck in Egypt. I heard the mike key, but I didn't register what was just said. My wingman answered, "Four Oh Four is on the right." What was that? Did paddles just ask which one I was? The next thing that ran through my mind was why was my RADALT (set at 450 feet) going off, and why I didn't see the carrier box, much less the lens?

"Four Oh Four, you are low and lined up right. Ten degrees left and climb." That's not a good start. All I saw was that single light ahead of me. I put in the correction.

"You are approaching centerline, below glide slope."

I reached up to turn the spinning HUD off and thought, "Here we go again."

Now I saw the landing area approaching from the left at high speed.

"You're on centerline, back to the right, approaching glide slope." Where was the ball? Here it comes racing off the bottom of the lens again. Not again. "You're overpowered, easy with it, power back on."

Damn, I trapped. Catch my breath. Now the yellowshirt was frantically waving at me. Why couldn't he give me a few seconds?

How did I get in this mess? As my roommate (the paddles who saved my life that night) and I sat around midrats Monday-night-quarterbacking, we hashed out my mistakes and tried to apply our global knowledge. I had no chance of getting an alignment with a degraded INS and there was nothing I do about the spinning standby indications.

We also determined my ILS was giving me faulty indications. However, remember mistake No. 1? As we looked back, even though lead had his data link off, the ship still locked him up, and was sending me the information. As we were both in the same piece of sky, our crosschecks concurred. The underlying problem was that the ship really had no idea which aircraft it had locked up when both aircraft were in the same area. This resulted in me receiving down and right indications when my wingman started to separate. Ergo, a low, lined-up-right start.

I know what you are thinking: What happened to flying a Mode 3 backup approach? At the time, I thought I was, and the needles were concurring right up to the point my wingman broke away.

How could I have prevented this? Remember mistake No. 2? Well, if I had just trusted my lead and flown a section approach right up to the ball call, I could have prevented all the above. I am fortunate that paddles was on the step or I could have been eating meat on a stick for rats, or worse, been fish bait.

Remember that single light I kept seeing on my second approach? It turned out that was the one light that lights up the bomb-staging area on the starboard side of the island. Not much room to land there.

An old lesson learned time and time again: Everyone is trying to kill you, and they sure don't need any help.



Lt.Cochran flies with VFA-87.